

**REMARKS OF FCC CHAIRMAN AJIT PAI  
AT THE ITU'S GLOBAL SYMPOSIUM FOR REGULATORS**

**SEPTEMBER 1, 2020**

Thank you to Doreen Bogdan-Martin for the kind introduction, and thank you to Chairman Dan Sjöblom for your leadership of GSR-20. How fortunate I am to call each of you a friend.

And congratulations on GSR's 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary! This brainchild of Doreen has become an important forum for discussion of ICT policies. One of my predecessors was a keynote speaker for the very first GSR, and I'm proud to continue my agency's tradition of enthusiastic support for it.

Obviously, we are meeting online and not in Geneva because of COVID-19. The pandemic has been a global challenge, and that has certainly been true for both the ICT sector and its regulators.

I've been asked to speak briefly about our experiences dealing with the pandemic in the United States, and some of the lessons we might be able to apply to unexpected events in the future.

When it comes to America's communications networks, the top headline is that they have performed extremely well during the COVID-19 pandemic. As one would expect, we saw significant increases in voice and Internet traffic as our lives and the economy moved online due to the pandemic. Our wired and wireless networks handled this surge without any significant service disruptions or declines. For example, according to Ookla, between March 2 and July 13, average fixed broadband speeds in the United States actually *increased* by 10% and average mobile broadband speeds went up by 4%.

What enabled this to happen?

It certainly took a lot of hard work and creativity by carriers. As one example, from March to July, Comcast, our nation's largest cable operator, averaged nearly 900 network improvements per week, on top of over 450 improvements to its core network. Because of these efforts, they added more than 128 Terabits of capacity.

But I would argue that the biggest reason U.S. carriers were equipped to handle the unexpected surge in traffic was the investments they made long before anybody had ever heard of COVID-19. Over the past couple of years, we've seen network investment hit levels that our nation hadn't seen for over a decade. For example, in 2018 and then again in 2019, the United States set records for annual fiber deployment. The number of wireless cell site installations has skyrocketed. According to CTIA, the total number of cell sites in the U.S. grew by more than 46,000 between 2018 and 2019—accounting for more growth than in the years 2015-18 combined.

Thanks to these investments, average fixed broadband speeds in the United States have doubled since December 2017. The number of Americans without access to 25/3 Mbps fixed broadband declined by 30% from 2016 to 2018. The number of Americans without access to 250/25 Mbps fixed broadband plummeted by 75%. And, yes, our networks were able to handle the demands created by a once-in-a-century pandemic.

What does this tell us as regulators?

For me, it's a powerful reminder that unleashing private markets often can be the most effective way to advance the public interest.

The results I've described in the U.S. were no accident. Since 2017, the FCC has taken numerous actions to reduce regulatory barriers and create incentives to invest in next-generation networks. Most notably, the FCC abolished rules to heavily regulate the Internet like a slow-moving utility under rules developed in the 1930s. And we restored a consistent, light-touch regulatory approach—one that protects the free and open Internet and encourages infrastructure investment. I already noted that investment has

surged since we made this change. I would also point out that broadband investment declined in the U.S. in 2015 and 2016 (two years when the Internet was treated like a public utility)—the first time that had happened outside of a recession in the Internet era.

Trusting markets over mandates also served us well in our response to the pandemic.

With massive shifts to telework, distance learning, and online commerce, it was clear from the outset of the pandemic that broadband would be an indispensable lifeline for consumers. And, so, our immediate priority was making sure that Americans stayed connected.

In times of crisis, some are tempted to force private companies to carry out the government's goals. But the FCC chose a different path.

In mid-March, I called on our nation's broadband and telephone service providers to pledge that for 60 days, no consumer or small business would have service cut off or be charged late fees because of disruptions caused by the pandemic. I also challenged them to open up their Wi-Fi hotspots to anyone who needed them. I called it the Keep Americans Connected Pledge. More than 700 providers, serving the vast majority of broadband and telephone consumers, answered this call.

We extended this Pledge beyond the original 60-day commitment, to June 30. Even more companies committed to this extension than to the initial Pledge. And many of them went beyond the Pledge on their own, offering free speed upgrades, discounted service for low-income consumers, and more.

By working with industry cooperatively, we made progress much more quickly than we would have had we pursued command-and-control regulation. For example, within 48 hours of proposing the Pledge, all of the nation's largest broadband providers had signed on.

The Commission also took swift and targeted actions to boost the performance of our wireless networks. Those decisions have had major positive impacts. We quickly granted several wireless providers temporary authority to use additional spectrum to meet customer demand for mobile broadband. And independent data has shown faster download speeds for carriers using this spectrum, even with increases in traffic.

Looking ahead as regulators, I think the most notable impact of the pandemic is that it ends, once and for all, any debate about the importance of Internet access. As I've said since my first day as Chairman, and as is quite clear now, Internet access is critical to being a full participant in today's economy and society. As such, I believe we must redouble our efforts to promote universal access to high-speed broadband. The FCC is doing just that with a number of initiatives. The most notable is next month's Rural Digital Opportunity Fund Phase I auction. That auction will award up to \$16 billion in support to deploy broadband networks in unserved areas and bring as many as 10.4 million Americans to the right side of the digital divide.

I'll briefly note one particular area where COVID-19 is proving to be a tipping point in the U.S.: telehealth. During the pandemic, more Americans have relied on connected care to get medical attention while avoiding exposure through in-person visits at hospitals. To promote telehealth during the pandemic, the FCC immediately made an additional \$42 million available through our Rural Health Care Program. We also executed a new \$200 million COVID-19 Telehealth Program to help health care providers deliver connected care services to patients at their homes or mobile locations. This funding is supporting everything from remote monitoring of child transplant patients to online mental health care consultations. These actions highlight the power of technology to connect Americans, especially in rural areas, with health care services that were previously out of reach.

Thank you for this opportunity to share the American perspective. I look forward to hearing from everyone else and continuing to work with you to expand the benefits of communications technology at home and around the globe.